Mohamad Alasfar

From *Dates and Wild Artichokes*

Translated by James Vizthum

Translator's Reflection

Even though the following excerpt comprises only the first few chapters of Mohamad Alasfar's novel *Dates and Wild Artichokes*, it tells a story in and of itself. The reader is introduced to a narrator who is obsessed with eating dates from his home country of Libya in his neighborhood in his country of refuge, Germany. The narrator's perpetual habit of eating Libyan dates and discarding the pits develops into a delightful tale with some unexpected and exciting twists. However, on top of this lighthearted narrative that captures the reader's attention, the author simultaneously presents the deeper, emotionally challenging aspects of living in refuge, both through the narrator's direct statements and memories and through numerous metaphors interspersed throughout the story.

The excerpt also makes a somewhat respectful mockery of German society. In one scene—the investigation into the missing date pits—the reader witnesses the order and efficiency of the fictional German municipality to an almost comical degree. This scene also reveals a subversive element: a lowly refugee is able to manipulate this system, even if his goal is something as seemingly insignificant as disposing of date pits on the grass. However, the tossing of date pits here may represent the figurative notion of planting a small seed that leads to great changes. At one point in the excerpt, the narrator frankly declares that "dates, as far as I am concerned, are a red line." This succinct statement ties together the story being told and the underlying theme of refugee life. For each refugee, there is a red line: a part of him or her that will always be tied to another culture and country, which no amount of time and acclimation will ever erase. By insisting that he maintain one specific aspect of his identity (tossing date pits on the grass), the narrator eventually succeeds in transforming the society around him. In other words, while the Germans have graciously accepted him as a "guest" in their society, in the end, both sides change each other.

From the perspective of translation, the novel presents two unique challenges. First, the author uses colloquial Libyan phrases to emphasize the narrator's specific identity. When translating these phrases into English, the underlying point of choosing those spe-

cific phrases may be lost. For example, the narrator sings a delightful song while eating Libyan dates. However, simply translating the lyrics into English would eliminate any indication that the song is Libyan. To make these instances clear, I have provided transliterations of the Arabic immediately ahead of English renderings of colloquial phrases and song lyrics. Finally, the title of the novel, *Tamr wa-Qaʿmūl*, also poses a translation challenge. While "dates" is straightforward, the second word is not. *Qaʿmūl* is a plant that only grows in one specific region of Libya, and efforts to find a unique translation for this word proved unsuccessful. The plant is, however, a type of wild artichoke, which thus enables the title *Dates and Wild Artichokes*. Perhaps this title, like the refugee in the story, can only assimilate to another language to a certain degree, with one aspect maintaining a distinct Libyan identity.

From *Dates and Wild Artichokes*

Dates

When I eat an orange, I keep the peel in my hand until I find a garbage can and throw it away. When eating dates, however, I don't look for a garbage can; I toss the pit directly on the grass. I never throw the pit on the asphalt for fear that cars will crush it.

I don't pay attention to the glances of disapproval at my actions, but rather I make excuses for these people, saying to myself that they are German citizens, and they can protest my actions if they want. After all, it is their country, and I am merely a temporary refugee. They graciously welcomed me and offered assistance, and I must respect their hospitality. Therefore, I shouldn't toss date pits in their parks but rather place them in spaces designated by the municipality for refuse, spaces every forty or fifty meters that have trash cans lined with plastic bags that municipal employees change two or three times a day.

I like to toss the pits on the soil. The sweetness of the date on my tongue orders me to do so. My heart requests that I sing:

Mawj an-nakhl khatar ʻalayya bilaadi
ya raytni wallayt minni ghaadi

The wave of the date palm brings my country to mind
how I wish I could return

I love the date palm. I see it as a graceful plant, lighthearted, its leaves like arms that wrap around me, and its date in my mouth that dances and sings. Unfortunately, I have not found a date palm in my place of refuge. I have found tall things, short things, and beautiful things, but not a date palm. I must, therefore, find my date palm in my own way. To me, each date is a palm oasis, and each palm oasis is home.

Since arriving in Germany, I have bought Libyan dates from a Moroccan or Iraqi grocery store, but when I do not find my favorite

brand of dates at these places, I request them from Libya. They come to me with the next Libyan traveling for medical care. I wish the sick a speedy recovery, and if they need help, I gladly offer it. Then I receive the precious treasure of my country. The type of date—*Tabuni*, *'Ami*, *Deglet*, *Saidi*, *Bikrari*, *Mirwani*, *Khadrawi*, *Barni*, *Negmet*, *Halawi*, etc.—is not a problem for me. All Libyan dates, in my opinion, are delicious; my sense of taste welcomes them, and I become overjoyed.

The German market offers excellent dates from a number of African Arab and Asian countries. Their price is low, but I don't buy them because they do nothing for me. These dates would not bring me joy even if they were stuffed with gold or dollars rather than just almonds or pistachios. The date must be the Libyan date that I know intimately—its flavor delighting my spirit—with dust covering it as if to preserve my happiness. When I blow on the dates, the dust scatters far, and the dates emerge like a sunrise greeting me, saying, "Welcome, my fellow countryman." And before my throat can burst into song, the dates beat me to it, singing:

Shabah an-nakhl khatar 'alayya bilaadi
The sight of the date palms brings my country to mind

The dates sing this song to me, set to the music of their palm leaves as the warm winds rock them back and forth, specifically the *qibli* winds of Libya—the warm southern winds carrying dust. Folk musicians sing of these winds:

Wa-yaa shaynak qibli sarhaadi
Haazak ya ghazayyel fil-waadi

Oh, what an awful, burning qibli wind
It stopped you in your tracks, O gazelle in the valley

The song "The Sight of the Date Palm Brings My Country to Mind" does not, unfortunately, come to me with the dates from other countries, dates I see and taste without any particular frame of mind. Algerian dates are delicious, Iraqi dates please me, Tuni-

sian dates bring me joy, and Gulf dates aren't bad, but Libyan dates are unmatched and unrivaled. The song only stirs in my soul when accompanied by Libyan dates. I have become accustomed to their taste, their feel. Perhaps I have truly become addicted to Libyan dates. When I am without them even for a short time, a million jinn and 60 million devils pursue me. I become anxious, I get headaches and a fever, and my liver hemorrhages.

The family doctor is a dark-skinned woman of Moroccan descent who helps me quickly with a fresh smile. The smile looks like the cloven date that is dripping with honey, so I calm down a little bit. And in order to be friendly and do justice by her magical smile, I calm down a lot—even entirely. She says to me, "Sit in the chair and relax . . . Imagine yourself at Cafe Hafa in Tangier sipping on mint tea."

I say to her, "I'm there now, and I'd be lying to you if I told you I'm imagining it."

The doctor analyzes my blood and urine, takes my pulse, and measures my blood pressure and sugar levels. Then, she tells me, "The analysis is normal, you are healthy." I feel her whisper to me, "Sing your song about dates and you will improve. Sing until your country's dates come to you. Singing about one's homeland is, in and of itself, a blessed medicine from God. Have you sent an email for an urgent shipment of your beloved Libyan dates? If you haven't done so, don't delay any longer, my friend. I can write you a prescription with just one word: *dates*."

I respond to her whispers: "I have emailed more than once, Doctor, but the Libyan representative said, 'We do not ship the dates.' However, I must, somehow, get my special dates. In the meantime, I'll keep eating any Libyan date I can get, and I'll keep tossing the pits here and there. Perhaps one dear pit—*bint halal*—will be kind enough to sprout, giving me the sweetness of my homeland that I need."

Apartment

The distance between the apartment in which I live with my family and the bus stop from which I take a bus downtown every day is

around 150 meters. The road to the bus stop is surrounded by green areas and small parks attached to buildings. To the right of my apartment is a Protestant church that has dark-skinned nuns. To the left of my apartment is a Catholic church that has white-skinned nuns. I don't differentiate between the two groups of nuns, just as I don't differentiate between the crosses of the two churches, or between the ringing of their noisy bells.

In front of our residential building is a supermarket and a number of other places offering goods or services: a pharmacy . . . a women's stylist . . . a café . . . a restaurant . . . a tailor . . . a dry cleaner . . . a perfume store . . . a post office . . . a bakery . . . a small bank . . . a dental clinic . . . a sports center. Behind our residential building there is a nursing home and beside it a private international school for the well-to-do. The curriculum at the school is in English, and the tuition is exorbitant. Behind the private school is a public elementary school where German students from blue-collar homes study with children of immigrants. There is also a kindergarten connected to the back of the Catholic church, and not far from that is a small police outpost inside of a ground-floor apartment in a tall residential building. The police outpost is closed. A policewoman only comes when there is work to do or a problem. She is a beautiful policewoman with blonde braided hair and a body that is tall, well-built, and athletic. Her hat passes in the window, and in her left nostril there is a thin, silver ring. And the middle of her right cheek—*ya saatir!*—is adorned with a lovely brown mole.

I really like seeing the policewoman as she walks elegantly toward the police outpost. A woman's walk excites me more than her face. A woman's gait has a special beauty, a beauty that makes my heart dance. Some steps smile. Some steps laugh. Some steps scowl. Some steps welcome you. Some steps flee from you. Some steps entice you. Some steps are barefoot. Some steps wear sandals. Some steps make the hips shake, going up and down and rotating along the way; one hip insults and another hip curses. Some steps do whatever they like. Ah, the footsteps, just the steps alone!

Once, I lost my ID card and informed the policewoman at the outpost. She made a report and said, "We will call you if we find it." When they found it at the supermarket in a nearby neighborhood—I

had dropped it when paying for groceries—she brought it right to the door of my apartment. She requested that I sign a proof of receipt on a small device with an electronic screen. I signed and then invited her to have tea or coffee or a martini, but she apologized for not having time, since she had to follow up with other important issues. In that case, I said, we should take a selfie to mark the occasion of finding the ID card. She happily agreed. We took the picture and I thanked her profusely, telling her, "The police in your country are really in service of the people."

She responded, "And also in service of our refugee brothers and sisters, whom we look forward to seeing assimilated into our society and becoming part of our people."

I really like to see her, but unfortunately infractions and security problems in our neighborhood are few, and she is barely present. Violations would need to occur for me to see her jumping out of her car and running toward the offenders, handcuffs, pistol, and electric baton swinging around her waist as if in an action movie. I get pleasure from observing expressions on her face other than those of joy and love for the job. Perhaps I will commit an infraction myself—something simple that I am guaranteed to get out of scot-free. A gentle, sweet infraction that is not harmful to anyone else—or to me, of course.

Our housing complex was constructed in 1966, but it is still as good as new, as if it were built only five years ago. Perhaps the building was maintained in such good condition because of the civilized residents who lived in it before us, or maybe it is due to regular maintenance operations undertaken by the company that owns it. On a daily basis, a representative of the company passes by the buildings and records observations that can even include a dirty stairwell. In that case, the next day, the company sends you a warning letter claiming that if the stairwell is not cleaned within a week, *dear esteemed resident*, "we will pay for a cleaning company to clean it, and we will transfer the bill to you for mandatory payment."

Living is comfortable in the housing complex, and no one suffers from any deficiencies related to electricity, water, telephone, internet, heating, or any other household necessity. All of the residents in the neighborhood are happy, and no one mentions any

problems, quarrels, or disputes. There are no complaints of trash in the stairwell or by the main door, and no complaints of dirt or smears on the window glass. Even the fallen leaves, as soon as someone gathers them into a small pile, are collected by being sucked into a wide, metallic scoop.

Most of the neighborhood residents are Germans, along with immigrants from various nationalities: Albanians . . . Serbians . . . Montenegrins . . . Kosovans . . . Georgians . . . Russians . . . Syrians . . . Moroccans . . . people from the Horn of Africa . . . Yemenis . . . people from Central and Western Africa . . . Iranians . . . Afghans . . . Cubans, Venezuelans, and other Latinos. As for Libyans, we are it. There was a small number of Libyan families that came to study at the expense of the Libyan government. However, we were unable to get to know them in a deep or satisfactory way, and all of those relationships were merely superficial. Those families were not families of the Cyrenaica cities (*Barqah*, or the eastern region of Libya). We can enter their hearts with a smile, with the folk poetry of *ghanaawah ʻalam*, or with the expression *liman bil-jawda?*—"To which great tribe do you belong?" Or, "Greetings to my kin! You're our uncles or brothers-in-law"—*kheekhi wa-bin 'eekhi*, as we say. But these families are from other cities in western Libya, and our relationship with them—despite our proximity in the neighborhood—is quite limited. If we happen to meet at a bus stop, metro station, market, or the mosque for Friday prayers or religious holidays, we are confined to simple greetings such as "Peace be upon you . . . How are you doing?"

Squirrels

Before leaving the apartment, I put a handful of the dates I enjoy in my pocket, and I toss the pits on the green surfaces close to our building and along the way to the bus stop. As usual, I see the silent glances of disapproval on the faces of the Germans, and, of course, I don't pay any attention. The people standing in front of the two churches are good and tolerant; not one of them has ever scolded or reprimanded me. Martin Luther, God rest his soul—there are no problems between him and me. Nor between me and the Vatican

Pope, may God grant him long life. I pass by, tossing the pits, and I don't face actual harm from the Christians, merely friendly glances of protest which strike me as reprimand, but I pay no heed to those piercing rebukes. Dates, as far as I am concerned, are a red line. Simply put, when I chew these dates and enjoy their sweetness at my leisure, and afterward toss their pits into the womb of life, I barely notice anyone else. In those moments, my delight bursts into Arabic song . . . *Seeing the date palm brings my country to mind.*

Despite my persistence in my beloved daily ritual, no one had reported me to the local authorities. And as for any date pit that I toss on the ground on any given day, I never see it the day after. It simply disappears from the place where I had tossed it, and I don't know who picks it up from the green spaces. Perhaps it is the street sweeper that passes each morning to clean the streets, sucking up cigarettes and leaves. However, that vehicle does not go up onto the green surfaces—all of its work is on the paved road or sidewalk. Whatever the case may be, my routine with the date pits did not continue in this manner, as one evening I returned home and, before going up to my apartment, I checked the mailbox and found—oh shit! *Hayih 'ala imik ya layd!*—a letter from the municipality. The letter notified me of an urgent summons to investigate my continued littering on a public street. They specified a day and time to stand before them with a warning for failure to appear.

At city hall, they showed me a number of pictures of myself tossing the date pits. In truth, I had no intention of denying this or of seeking legal counsel to defend me. Rather, I was happy to immediately confess to tossing the pits on the fertile German soil and to admit doing so willfully and wholeheartedly. The investigator, with a thin, blond mustache said, "Someone observed your behavior, brought pictures to us, and we, in our role, would like to know why you are doing this and doing this regularly." He added, adjusting his glasses with his thumb and index finger, "The fact that you continue to throw the pits on the ground is something that we cannot ignore, and we had considered the issue to be a psychological condition or illness that requires early treatment. We do not consider this to be a mere coincidence or a joke that you will cease doing after you have gotten your fill."

I nodded my head in agreement, and he added, "Don't worry about this summons. We mainly want to help you, as you are a guest in our country, and throughout your stay with us you have respected all of the laws, and no violations or infractions have been recorded. You can respond now, or you can wait until you call a doctor, lawyer, or a sworn interpreter. All of your rights are guaranteed, and your dignity is safeguarded by the German constitution."

I said to him, "I toss the date pits out in the open, and all of the Germans in my area watch me with their own eyes and not one of them requested that I stop doing this. Every day I toss five or seven pits and they never pile up anywhere."

The investigator said, "You are right that there aren't any piles of date pits. After receiving the photographs, we went there more than once, and we swept the area with our equipment, and, unfortunately, we didn't find any pits on the ground. However, the pictures and video clips make it clear that you were indeed tossing the pits on the ground."

I glanced at the pictures to find out from which corner or location I had been photographed. From the church? No. From the market or other businesses? No. It had to be from an apartment window of the building adjacent to ours, one with no tall trees in front of it that would block the photographer's view. Who exactly is this do-gooder who was observing me? If only I knew, I could say thank-you in my own way.

The investigator said, "We investigated the matter and discovered that the pits you were throwing are being gathered by the many squirrels spread throughout your mountainous neighborhood. Your neighborhood was originally a dense forest before part of it was cleared to build residences in the 1970s. One day, we were observing you from a position where you couldn't see us, and we saw a squirrel, whose color was somewhere between yellow and brown, take a pit that you had tossed behind you while you were smiling. Then the squirrel quickly climbed the trunk of a tall tree with the pit. Here is a picture of the squirrel."

I looked at the picture, and there really was a gold-colored squirrel, one that I had seen more than once scampering away in front of me and climbing the trees. It always seems that he is happy to see

me, and he was never wary of the nice guy that I am, sometimes even approaching me from a distance of just two or three steps away. I often imagine that his big, dark brown eyes are smiling at me.

Unfortunately, in our country, we don't have squirrels. We have an animal called a jerboa that resembles a kangaroo puppy or a mouse. You can only hunt the jerboa by pouring water into its many burrows and waiting a moment for it to escape from the man-made typhoon that has turned its hole into a watery state of emergency—for it to jump suddenly from the muddy burrow and run away. The jerboa is an intelligent rodent, but the squirrel is beautiful, kind, and happy. True, the Libyan jerboa does not care about date pits and eats other things, but, to be honest, its meat is delicious when grilled. Moreover, folk doctors and fortune tellers at the Albaladi hotel bazaar in Benghazi say that the jerboa meat is a medicine for many chronic and dangerous diseases.

Jerboas in my country have miserable luck and never enjoy any comfort. They are always being pursued by both professional and amateur hunters, among them those who desire the jerboa meat for food or medicine and others who hunt it for nothing more than enjoyment. The jerboas are always raising their tiny hands to the sky, asking for protection, but only more hunters come. Perhaps one day the jerboa will become extinct because of this unjust hunting that is also, on paper, forbidden by the forest protection apparatus. However, in reality, you only hear the shouts and exclamations of the hunters, saying to one another, "Grab the jerboa . . . It's getting away . . . It escaped from there . . . No, from there!"

The investigator said to me, "Whatever you are thinking about, son, don't worry. Your problem is very simple."

I told him, "The squirrel's eyes reminded me of an animal in our country that resembles it called the jerboa. It is an oppressed animal with bad luck because it doesn't live here, where it could scavenge for hazelnuts, almonds, and chestnuts. Anyhow, let's return to the original topic: the habit of tossing the date pits makes me happy, and I would not like to stop it. If I were to stop doing it on a daily basis, my mental health would be very damaged. Our family doctor knows that, and I have a file concerning dates in the archives of her clinic. This is the ritual that makes it possible for me to tolerate homesick-

ness and life in exile. If you forbid me from doing this thing that I love, I will complain about you to human rights organizations, civil societies, the Green Party, the Christian Party, the Socialist Party, the Leftist Party, as well as the organization for the protection of squirrels. Moreover, I will complain to all of the churches of Germany. Really, there is nothing in this beautiful country that gives me more joy than the dates and their pits that I toss on the grass and mud. If you wish for me to stop tossing the pits, I will do so reluctantly and deal with the pain, but if some unpleasant thing were to happen, you all would bear the responsibility."

The investigator said to me, "Don't worry. Your happiness and health are important to us. I'll make a deal with you for the sake of your mental health and this habit you love so much. Providing psychological comfort for the refugee is among the priorities of our municipality, and we must vigorously support this priority. The German taxpayers would be very happy if their money went toward making someone happy who is otherwise depressed and miserable because he is far from his homeland. As long as the pits are picked up by the squirrels, and the pits are not piling up and causing any environmental pollution, we will allow you to continue tossing them. We are going to write a permit for you to toss the pits, so toss them as you please, *our dear guest*. However, if the pits begin to pile up, we will kindly forbid you to do so, and if you resist, we will use the force of the law. What do you think?"

I bumped his fist with my fist and said to him, "*Ya deen immi!* Heck yeah bro, I agree!"

After obtaining the permit, I began gleefully tossing the pits. My mouth would chew the dates, taking pleasure in the sweetness, and my hand would dispose of the pits slowly, as if sowing a seed. As for my spirits, they were intoxicated by this action to the utmost degree.

In the evenings, I sit on the balcony drinking a cup of coffee or a glass of alcohol, usually wine or Italian grappa. I imagine that the grappa is actually Benghazi grappa (double distilled), taking me back to the country and all its worries and craziness. In front of me is the horizon stretched out and ending at the snow-capped mountains, and I see the scenes of Benghazi that I love: the sea waves along the Benghazi corniche; the cathedral with its two magnificent

domes like two bosoms ready to nurse the sky; the Sidi Khrebish lighthouse; the Tree Square; the Julyana summer resort; the Albaladi hotel bazaar; Bugula Street and the Jareed and Thalaam markets; July 23 Park and Gamal Abdel Nasser Street; Cafe Labda; the barber Maziq; Sports City; the Albaraka neighborhood; the Sidi Hussein neighborhood with the restaurant Hamidu Fasuliya and my many friends there, especially my friend Alhameed Qays and his father Hussein Qarquum Hayta, whose sense of humor makes me live in a state of continual laughter; and the Almuheeshi neighborhood where I lived before departing for Germany.

I drink and eat dates, calmly tossing the pits down below. On the floor below us lives a Syrian family that loves roses and is always putting red flower pots on the balcony. On the ground floor lives a Yemeni family with whom we have a good and solid relationship. They are always sending us Yemeni food, and when it is our turn, we send them Libyan food. They will send us a meal of long rice mixed with strips of potatoes and chicken drumsticks, and we will send them a meal of short rice mixed with pumpkin, zucchini, carrots, green beans, hummus, potatoes, mutton, and, of course, fried red bell peppers. As for the Syrian family, they are always sending us baklava, knafeh, basbousa, ma'amoul (date cookies), appetizers, and various salted, pickled vegetables. In return, we send them makroudh (cookies filled with dates and nuts), cake, algareeba (sugar cookies), sfinz (spongy fried bread), zalabiyeh (fritters), olive oil, and harissa.

The neighbors—God bless them—are good people. Even if a date pit strays from its course and heads toward the park grass, or if the wind pushes it onto the balcony of the Syrians, Yemenis, or other families, they wouldn't file a complaint against me. Instead, they would return the dear, revered pit to me on a plate or in a small cup so that I may launch it again the next time. Indeed, they understand me—may God keep them well and make them happy—and they know that tossing the pits allows me to forget my homesickness and pain. The first time that I dropped a pit onto their balcony, I apologized to them, saying, "Whoever among you has not sinned may throw a date at me."

They laughed, and the head of their family said to me, "No worries—if only all of the shots that hit me were dates."

After a while, a few date pits sprouted. Seedlings taking the shape of green legs burst forth in several locations on the ground surrounding our building. The green legs were draped with green feathers on both sides that later transformed into palm leaves. Perhaps the squirrels were on a vacation, or they migrated to another place, and so they didn't come to pick up more pits, and those pits germinated. Maybe the squirrels themselves planted the pits by burying them in the dirt for the purpose of storage, just as they do with the hazelnuts and other types of nuts. Maybe they got the pits wet with saliva, which acted as a sort of irrigation, or they urinated or defecated on the dirt where they had buried the pits, and this organic fertilizer gave the pits the strength to sprout upward toward the sun.

The days preceding the discovery of my beautiful plants were hot, to the point where we started to smell the odor of something emanating from the ground after being still and frozen during the cold. The weather of those days was similar to the climate in northern Africa, and it made all of Europe complain about a heat wave. Due to the melting snow on top of the mountains, flooding occurred, and the water level of many rivers rose and submerged buildings and houses on the riverbanks. Moreover, some deaths occurred among older people and children due to the rising temperatures, and many animals died due to an outbreak of forest fires, a result of the madness that nature metes out on our planet from time to time. In those days, some people began walking nearly naked in the streets. The ice cream shops were crowded with lickers, and the public pools were also more packed than I had ever seen them before. The ground beneath us felt a bit warm, perhaps from the central heating lines for the ground-floor apartments or from an underground spring that had been motionless but was now furiously bubbling. Honestly, I didn't care about the reason; I was just overjoyed that the pits succeeded in sprouting in a climate that was not their native weather and soil that was not their native soil. These pits were like an immigrant who strives to acclimate to an environment that is not his or her native environment, trying to blend in by learning the language and respecting the customs and laws.

Perhaps the date pits drew strength from my mouth as well, before reaching the mouth of the squirrel. The pits may have taken a little bit of my date-loving soul's yeast with them before going to sleep in the ground. There, they would be planted just as I have been planted in Germany, trying to align myself with their precise, organized manner of life. Customarily, I do not remove the pit from the date in the open air, that is, outside of my mouth. My method for eating dates is based on leisureliness: I put the date in my mouth, and inside that warm factory, the eating procedures are carried out slowly. I begin by stripping the pit of its sweet golden-brown and white clothing. Then, after making sure it has been exhausted by the caresses of my tongue, and that it has taken its share of warmth from my soul, I push it forward between my lips where my fingers gently receive it. I contemplate the pit and confirm that it is warm, alive, and full of love. Then, I send it to our Mother Earth, which will certainly not neglect it but rather provide it with means of subsistence and favorable conditions for life.

After some time, the new plants began to grow taller with confidence and enthusiasm. Their cylindrical trunks thickened from the bottom, and dense palm leaves came out from all sides. They were growing faster than German trees and plants, as if they were being nourished with a beneficial and fast-acting protein, like the ones athletes take for their bodies. Or rather, as if they were stealing the nourishment from the neighboring German trees and plants. But perhaps those trees and plants were fine with it, and they love altruism, gladly giving their nutrients to the newly arrived date palms. Maybe the generosity of plants far exceeds that of humans, or maybe there are no evil, far-right, extremist plants to obstruct the natural growth of the new plants by nipping them in the bud.

My date pits were planted in natural, favorable conditions, even better than the conditions of a greenhouse within an agricultural college. The winds from all directions supported the pits with love and warmth. Even the cold that tried to kill them was resisted; instead, the pits actually embraced it and acclimated to it. As for the autumn that strips the German trees of their leaves, it left the palm leaves as they were—tender, ripe, and green. Perhaps autumn is afraid of removing leaves from the date palm. Perhaps it won't approach palm

branches to rip out their leaves for reasons of its own, and it does not desire to reveal these reasons to us. For just as winter, spring, and summer have their secrets, autumn has its own secrets as well.

My date pits were planted and became date palms. I will not search for the secret to their success in growing. They are, in the end, blessed trees, among the trees celebrated and preordained by God. Generally speaking, I don't inquire about issues related to date palms, olive trees, fig trees, or even pomegranate trees. I feel that something spiritual protects those trees from conditions of nature, human oppression, insect abuse, and diseases.

I was pleased with their actions, their willfulness, and their resilience in the face of harsh nature. Thank God, I finally had a homeland. I finally had a date palm oasis close to me, and every day I would watch the oasis palms swaying rhythmically together, they singing to me and I singing to them. However, as usual in my bewildering life, through which I have suffered, my elation didn't last for long. Soon thereafter the Ministry of Agriculture, which came by routinely to prune trees and mow the lawns of our neighborhood parks, discovered the foreign trees. The Ministry knew that I was the one who planted them, unintentionally, of course, but nevertheless in agreement with the municipality via the permit that was granted to me some time before. And so, of course, they summoned me urgently. They gave me the choice between uprooting the foreign trees that I had planted by tossing the pits or moving the trees to a nursery with other trees belonging to the agricultural college in the city. There, the date palms could join a diverse group of plants from around the world, and they would be observed by tourists and studied by students of agriculture, pharmacy, and alternative medicine, especially in matters connected to the ability of the date palms to germinate and live in a non-native environment.

The Ministry of Agriculture would pay me a reward for my effort in cultivating the date palms, but I refused. I quickly went to the municipality and filed a complaint. The real estate company supported me, saying, "As long as the Libyan tenant is linked to us by an official contract, and for years he has been regular in paying rent, heat, and maintenance fees, he has total freedom to plant any plants he desires in the yards belonging to the real estate company, with

the exception of poisonous plants or drug-producing plants such as poppy seeds. Regarding the date palms, these are legal trees under no uncertain terms."

All of the neighbors were delighted that many date palms would be planted around the building in the future, and they pledged to care for my little palms, even without my requesting them to do so. The neighbors placed charming little clay circles around the palms to prevent them from getting trampled, and they did not allow children to play nearby. Even the squirrels, after returning, found that what they had buried for later use had sprung up as palm trees, and they did not harm the palm roots or leaves. Instead, they seemed cheerful, circling around the palms and trying to climb up. Of course, the squirrels continued their pastime of taking the charity that I tossed. On more than one occasion, I noticed that they would take a pit and wouldn't bury it in the dirt but rather ascend to the treetops and store it there inside of a narrow crack they had made in the bark.

The senior citizens would look out of their windows and balconies, observing the foreign trees in the park across from their nursing home. On their strolls in the afternoons, they would ask the nurses to push their wheelchairs near these trees to take a closer look. They took great delight in watching as the squirrels danced around the trees and tried to climb up, unafraid of piercing the braided outer layer of the palm tree. When the elderly people discovered that I was observing them from my balcony, they would wave hello, and I would ask my young daughter to go down right away with a plate of Libyan dates that had recently arrived from Fezzan, Jalu, or Aljala. My daughter would distribute the dates as if passing out candy. The *Deglet* date is very moist, with no need for chewing. Each elderly person would take one date. Some enjoyed sucking it down as if it were warm ice cream; some said that they first needed a doctor's permission, but they would store it in a drink or biscuit container that was with them; and others extracted the pit from the date and then placed the date in a bun or between two biscuits, eating it with afternoon tea. With each bite they would smile and look at the date palms with leaves being moved by the wind.

The date palms grew quickly. The ground became their home, and the sky welcomed their height. As for their roots, they expanded

and spread out comfortably to the depths of the earth, with twisted lanes in every direction. The roots tried to fix themselves well in the soil that was previously unfamiliar to those particular roots and their genes. The roots tried to reach beneficial ground nutrients different from those that come from the rainy sky, which provides irrigation. The roots were searching for natural warmth from below, searching for a hot sun that was not deceptive like the one that rose upon them each morning but was empty of warmth, emitting cold rays of light and nothing more.

Roots

The asphalt road that ran between us, the church, and the nursing home began to crack. One wide crack looked like a trench, splintering in the middle, with other small cracks spreading out to the sides. The cracks began to fill with water, and they damaged cars, passersby, motorcycle riders, and the like. Even children on skates were hurt, with one child stumbling on the trench and bruising his knees and elbows. A nursing home team was vigilant, pushing wheelchairs gently when they approached the cracks, so that no elderly person would hurt their brittle bones. Naturally, many complaints were raised because of the cracks, especially from those driving fancy cars to drop off their kids at the international school each morning and pick them up in the afternoon.

It was on a weekend when the construction workers suddenly came in their vehicles to inspect the road. They took photographs of the road as well as a sample of the cracked asphalt. Two hours later, a company came with its equipment to repair the road, and thus began the work to treat the cracks. They had only dug about half a meter down when they came upon the roots of a date palm that had stretched out in the dirt like an interwoven chain beneath the workers. The workers began to use their tractor to carefully pull apart the roots without breaking them, altering the direction of the roots toward the vegetable garden and the mother date palm. The workers used caution in dealing with the roots, as if they were arteries carrying blood. Instructions had been given for them to be cau-

tious while digging and to treat with kindness any plant or creature residing underground.

The company engineer who was supervising the workers began to take pictures of the roots that caused the cracks while also taking samples of the surrounding soil and the soil stuck to the roots so it could be analyzed. Then, she ordered the workers to dig to a depth of two meters in order to fix the road properly and to not allow the cracking to return, no matter how much weight was put on the asphalt and no matter how hard it rained. The workers began their digging, without causing any damage to the plants. They had made good progress, but when they wanted to execute the engineer's instructions and go deeper, the bucket of the backhoe struck the body of a metallic object, sending out a ring like that of the church bells. The workers immediately stopped digging and called the engineer, who was sipping coffee at the buffet cart next to the company equipment, and she hurried over immediately. She used a metal scraper with rough teeth like a comb to wipe the surface of the metallic object, discovering some letters on its body. She called the police, army, fire department, and hospital. The metallic object was, in fact, a huge, old bomb appearing to date back to World War II. Soon thereafter, a state of emergency was announced in the city, and the secure neighborhood was transformed into what resembled an active military barracks teeming with soldiers, weapons, and vehicles with advanced electronic equipment. Residential neighborhoods and businesses surrounding the bomb hole were evacuated, and the roads heading into the neighborhood were closed. The seniors were transported by ambulances to other centers of accommodation, and the municipality took responsibility for the building residents, opening up a number of schools for them in other neighborhoods so that they could rest until the dangerous threat to their lives was over. The nuns and clergymen from the two churches preferred to remain with the army and police to pray. As for the tall policewoman with the blonde braids, given that the incident had occurred in her neighborhood, she was standing directly at the mouth of the hole, assisting the specialists in deactivating the bomb. After two hours of exhausting, meticulous work, the deactivation of the bomb that looked like

a small missile was complete. The bomb weighed more than two kantars (about two hundred pounds). Fortunately, it never exploded throughout the dozens of years it spent sleeping underground, perhaps because it fell between the two churches. Each church had nursed the congregations with the milk of peace and security, and later the nursing home was built, with those powerless seniors safeguarded by Jesus and his disciples.

The bomb was extracted by a crane belonging to the civil defense. They placed it with great care and caution on a special military truck and took it out of the area. All types of media were present, and the journalists took many photographs. Satellite TV channels conducted numerous interviews with the city mayor, the police, and leaders of the bomb squad, in addition to some members of the fire department, ambulance crews, civil defense, and the lead engineer who discovered the bomb. After that, the road workers resumed their work, residents were permitted to return to their homes, and the elderly were permitted to return to the nursing home. They were all very happy, and everyone gave thanks to the date palms. If not for the blessing of their roots, the bomb would not have been discovered. The director of the nursing home suggested that the elderly residents themselves present a valuable gift to whomever it was that planted the date palms of peace.